

Meeting: Second Public Meeting of the Cuba Internet Task Force

Date: Thursday, December 6, 2018, 3:30 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Location: Department of State, Harry S. Truman Building, Room 1107

Chair: Dale Eppler, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary, Western Hemisphere Affairs

In Attendance: Task Force Members

Jonathan Fritz, Director of Bilateral Affairs for International Communications and Information Policy, Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs, Department of State

Catherine Newling, Deputy Director, Office of Western Hemisphere Affairs, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Department of State

Sharon Sadler-Gray, Director, Office of Cuban Affairs, U.S. Agency for International Development

Tomas Regalado, Director, Office of Cuba Broadcasting, Broadcasting Board of Governors

Michele Wu-Bailey, Senior Legal Advisor, International Bureau, Federal Communications Commission

Fiona Alexander, Associate Administrator, National Telecommunications and Information Administration, Department of Commerce

Carlos Ponce, Director of Latin America and the Caribbean, Freedom House

Ashley Friedman, Senior Director of Global Policy, Information Technology Industry Council

Gilberto Torres-Vela, Office of Cuban Affairs, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, Department of State (Executive Secretary)

Other U.S. Government Representatives

Rachel Alpert, Office of the Legal Adviser, Department of State

Timothy Zuniga-Brown, Western Hemisphere Affairs, Department of State

Erica Magallon, Western Hemisphere Affairs, Department of State

Laura Santini, Western Hemisphere Affairs, Department of State

Public

Alex Sadler
Alexa Tzuan Lee
Allen Speer
Gabrielle Jorgensen
Jaime Hamre
Jillian Norton
Juan Carlos Monje
Juan Suarez
Kirsten Laver
Marcell Felipe
Maria Fernandez Garcia
Phil Peters
Robert A. Friedman
Sanja Kelly

Media

Rolando Napoles - Americateve
Luis Alberto Porras - Americateve
Michelle Sague - Radio Marti

Opening

The Chair convened the second meeting of the Cuba Internet Task Force Thursday, December 6, 2018, at 3:30 p.m.

Introductory Remarks

The Chair delivered general opening remarks regarding the purpose of the Cuba Internet Task Force (CITF), which is consistent with the National Security Presidential Memorandum (NSPM-5) on “Strengthening the Policy of the United States Toward Cuba.” He explained the role of the CITF as an advisory committee, with neither operational nor programmatic capabilities nor responsibilities. The Chair stated the Cuban government clearly recognizes the importance of the Internet, as it continues to use the Internet for its own

propaganda purposes. He highlighted that the CITF supports the Cuban people's aspirations to access and freely use the Internet, just as the Cuban government is able to do. The Chair acknowledged that over the past year, the Cuban government has introduced additional Wi-Fi hotspots and has recently made 3G service available for mobile phone users. However, the relatively high cost of the service when compared to the average citizen's salary may prove prohibitive, and he noted Cubans are still subject to strict Internet censorship.

During the inaugural Task Force meeting in February, the CITF agreed to form two subcommittees chaired by Freedom House and the Information Technology Industry Council (ITI) to 1) examine the role of the media and the free, unregulated flow of information, and 2) examine challenges and opportunities for expanding Internet access in Cuba.

The Chair said the CITF would review recommendations proposed by the subcommittees and by members of the public and would ultimately deliver a report with recommendations to the Secretary of State. He emphasized the importance of expanding Internet access and the free and unregulated flow of information in Cuba, and urged attendees to assist the CITF in compiling practical, implementable, near-term recommendations.

Next Item of Business: Subcommittee Recommendations

The Chair thanked Freedom House and ITI for volunteering to lead the two subcommittees and then asked each subcommittee to present its findings to the CITF.

Freedom House: The civil society-led subcommittee consisted of 14 civil society members, academics, and technology-focused companies. The group met in person twice and maintained contact via a Google group. Their report drew upon comments from large technology companies and results gleaned from its survey of nearly 1,700 Internet users in Cuba.

Sanja Kelly of Freedom House represented the civil-society subcommittee during the CITF meeting and presented its findings related to the role of the media and the free, unregulated flow of information in Cuba. She listed the highly authoritarian Cuban government as the main obstacle to the free flow of information in Cuba due to its deliberate restrictions on access to certain websites, harassment of independent journalists, and purposefully slow release of Internet services. Freedom House also noted the Internet is too expensive for average Cubans who

earn under \$30 a month. Most Cuban Internet users choose to prioritize using it only to communicate with family and friends abroad. Additional challenges include the uncertainty surrounding the U.S. embargo and in particular, perceived regulatory risks around “cloud computing” and bank transactions destined for Cuba. The following is a non-exhaustive list of the sub-committee’s recommendations for the CITF to consider in its final report to the Secretary of State:

- Access to Technology: Ease the U.S. embargo to authorize U.S. cloud computing technologies and related financial services; U.S. regulations should, however, strengthen restrictions for filtering and surveillance-related technologies;
- Digital Safety and Censorship Navigation: Support programs that protect Cuban Internet users from security threats. Eighty percent of the approximately 1,700 Cubans surveyed by Freedom House and Apertaste indicated an interest in learning about digital security; and
- Information and Communication Technologies (ICT): Support ICT literacy programs that empower Cubans to use the Internet as a medium to exchange views on political and economic topics and not solely for the purposes of personal communication.

ITI: The private sector-led subcommittee included a variety of industry representatives with expertise in broadband deployment, connectivity, devices, and services. The subcommittee, which was tasked with examining challenges and opportunities for expanding Internet access in Cuba, identified numerous challenges, including U.S. export restrictions; Cuban government regulations; slow speed and poor infrastructure; the high price of Internet services; and security concerns. Based on these challenges, the subcommittee proposed that the CITF consider the following recommendations among others, in its final report:

- Reduce export barriers for U.S. technology;
- Clarify U.S. export policy;
- Provide direct export assistance, grants, or export credits to U.S. companies interested in the Cuban market. ITI noted Chinese companies often have an advantage over U.S. companies because the Chinese government offers the Cubans credit and investment;
- Invest in projects that increase the utility of, and demand for, Internet in Cuba;

- Initiate a dialogue with the Cuban government and private sector leaders to share best practices; and
- Encourage the Cuban government to continue to increase the availability of public and private Internet access spots.

Following the presentation of the subcommittee reports, members of the CITF had an opportunity to comment on the recommendations. Tomas Regalado, Director of the Office of Cuba Broadcasting and member of the CITF, disagreed strongly with the recommendation to initiate a dialogue with the Cuban government and urged the CITF not to include that recommendation in its final report to the Secretary. Regalado stressed the Cuban government continues to block the free flow of information in Cuba by restricting access to websites that are politically critical of the government or that defend human rights. Regalado highlighted the biggest challenge to unfettered access to information in Cuba is not the embargo, but rather the Cuban government's draconian control of the Internet.

Carlos Ponce, Director of Latin America and the Caribbean at Freedom House, agreed that dialogue with the Cuban government to advance Internet services in Cuba would be futile. The Cuban government, he added, uses the embargo as an excuse to continue its repressive activities in Cuba. Ponce noted it is important to consider ways to empower Internet users through existing technologies.

Next Item of Business: Public Comments

The Chair opened the floor to oral statements from members of the public in attendance. The meeting was open to the public on a first-come, first-served RSVP basis. Thirteen members of the public and representatives of two news outlets attended.

The following four members of the public provided oral statements during the meeting: Allen Speer, Marcell Felipe, Phil Peters, and Juan Suarez.

Members of the public expressed support for increasing Internet access for all Cubans and one participant urged the CITF to consider supporting additional, offline methods of information flow in Cuba. A few debated whether collaboration with the Cuban government to develop Internet infrastructure would lead to positive results. One attendee voiced concern about not being informed of the first public meeting or being included on a subcommittee; another attendee reminded the participants that all information regarding the CITF, including participation in

the subcommittees, was publicly available and emphasized the CITF is an open, public forum.

Some echoed challenges identified by the subcommittees, and in particular noted U.S. industry is at a disadvantage because it is unable to offer financing to Cuba for its products the way China does. Others highlighted that U.S. policy might impede efforts to expand internet access and the free flow of information in Cuba. One in particular remarked U.S. companies might be deterred from developing internet infrastructure in Cuba if Title III of the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (Libertad) Act is not suspended.

Next Item of Business: Final Report for the Secretary of State

The Chair proposed having the Department of State's Office of the Coordinator for Cuban Affairs draft an initial report after reviewing the subcommittee reports and public comments. The Office of the Coordinator for Cuban Affairs, he explained, would then circulate the draft report to all members of the Task Force for their comments, additions, deletions, and consensus. The Chair proposed that the Task Force finalize and transmit the report to the Secretary of State by May 2019.

The Task Force members agreed to this proposal. The Chair announced the Task Force would continue to receive and consider comments from the public through December 21, 2018.

Adjourn

The Chair thanked the public for its participation and encouraged the public to submit additional written comments by December 21 via the CITF website or by emailing CubaITF@state.gov.

Unless extended by the President, the Task Force will terminate June 16, 2019.

The Chair adjourned the meeting at 4:55 p.m.

Minutes certified on December 14, 2018 by Dale Eppler, Chair

